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Kateri Tekakwitha

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Kateri submitted Father Cholenec's letters and other documents to the Vatican during the 1930s for the official introduction of her cause.

"She passed an entire hour in the church weeping and sighing while she prepared herself, and when she began her confession it was always with such loud sobs that she would have given her confessor much difficulty in understanding her, had he not otherwise known her angelical innocence," the missionary priest added.

At times, the missionaries had to dissuade her from such extreme mortifications as sleeping on thorns or with hot coals. She mixed what little food she consumed with ashes. Kateri died in Canada at 24. Since that time, her reputation for miracles has grown among Native Americans and others alike. None, however, has been accepted as official cause for her canonization.

Kateri draws devotion

Kateri's cause was submitted in 1884 along with those of the eight North American Jesuit martyrs, the continent's first saints (though of European and French origin), who were canonized in 1930. Kateri wasn't a martyr, however, and her cause has taken the longer route to sainthood, requiring proof of miracles. It wasn't until 1943 that she was declared venerable, and 1980 that she was beatified.

"Unlike other candidates for sainthood, who were clergy, founders of religious orders, theologians, or mystics, Blessed Kateri was only a common person with a strong religious temperament," James J. Preston wrote in 1989 in the journal *Literature and Medicine*.

"Yet, her cult has been growing steadily since her death over three hundred years ago," added Preston, an anthropology professor at the State University of New York College at Oneonta who studies devotion to saints.

"She has different meanings to different people," Preston told the *Catholic Courier* in a recent telephone interview, acknowledging a fascination with her appeal to different cultures. But overall, he said, "Her life was an example of very powerful, inner strength."

Bishop Charles J. Chaput of the Diocese of Rapid City, S.D., wrote in a letter to the *Courier* that Kateri's canonization "is very important to Native Americans, both in Canada and in the United States, primarily because she is one of us and also because she provides for Native people a model of inculturation. She is an embodiment of the process of making the Gospel part of one's life and giving oneself to Christ in a full way as an Indian person."

The bishop explained that he is a member of the Prairie Band Potawatomi Tribe, whose reservation is in northeast Kansas. And though he prays every morning for the canonization of this first Native American saint of North America, he said, he would not want it handled differently than those of other saints.

"We would not want a canonization that does not fulfill all the requirements expected of others," he said.

In New York, other devotees say they had heard of Kateri Tekakwitha (pronounced in various ways, including KATER-ee Tek-uh-WEETH-uh) long ago, but became better acquainted through personal difficulties or simply by pursuing an initial interest.

Father Edward Zimmer, a retired priest at St. John the Evangelist Church on Humboldt Street in Rochester, is one such devotee.

"I have always had a love for the land," he said, explaining his affinity for Blessed Kateri. "Indians and the land are synonyms."

And, he said, "I really believe the Indi-

ans were treated shabbily by our country."

Father Zimmer has set up a shrine to Kateri in his garden behind St. John's Sullivan Center. In another corner of the diocese, he named his 150-acre summer mountain camp near Ithaca for her. He's also fitted his car with "2 KATERI" license plates.

For Ann Maloney, who promotes Kateri whenever possible, "She is very easy to emulate. She is so very full of peace and the love of God, in spite of everything. ... She has enhanced my joy of life, of day-to-day living."

A social worker, Maloney became acquainted with Kateri three or four years ago through a priest cousin. She became so caught up in devotion to her that she petitioned the Vatican for and received a first-class relic, a piece of Kateri's bone, on her 47th birthday this summer.

The family of Brannon Smith of Transfiguration Parish in Pittsford likewise came to know Kateri in recent years. After learning of Brannon's struggles with Ewing's Sarcoma since his 1992 diagnosis, Father Lawrence P. Searles, SJ, then-chaplain at McQuaid Jesuit High School, suggested that family members pray for her intercession and led them and friends in their efforts.

Since then, countless petitioners around the country and overseas as well have prayed to Kateri on Brannon's behalf.

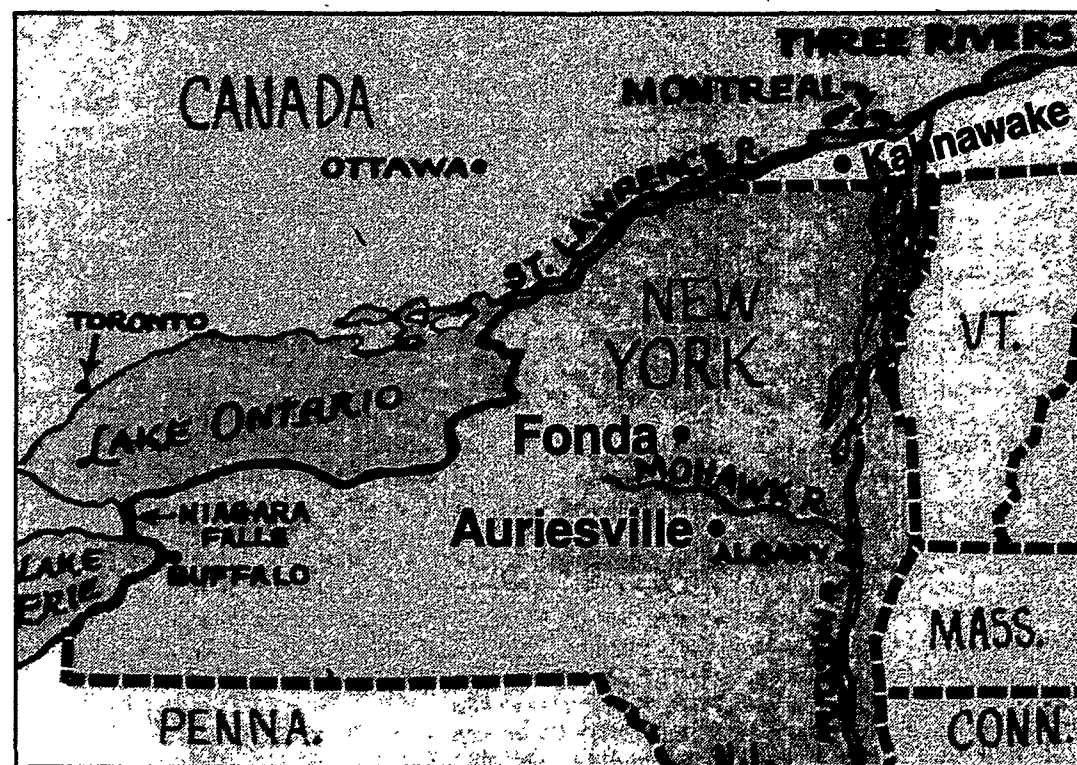
"People responded with so much love, prayers, and support, it was absolutely incredible," remarked Kathy Smith, Brannon's mother.

This spring, Brannon successfully completed his freshman year at Georgetown University and came home for the summer. Yet the cancer that forced him to endure three major surgeries and a bone-marrow transplant has spread. His doctors say there is nothing more they can do.

"We are still praying for a miracle for him," Kathy Smith said tearfully, adding that their devotion to Kateri has helped the family through these hardest times. "Just when you think nothing is going right, she is there guiding."

Father Patrick Connor of the Eastside Catholic Parish in Elmira prayed for the sick and suffering of his parish while visiting Kateri's birthplace and the National Shrine of North American Martyrs at Auriesville, N.Y., last month with 46 Elmira-area pilgrims.

He noted that the Psalms read during the day's Mass, appropriate for people facing illnesses and other suffering today, likely comforted Kateri and the eight martyrs as well. His trip to the old Mohawk Valley, the site of bloodshed by the martyrs just before Kateri's time, set him to thinking.



The shrines associated with Kateri Tekakwitha

Shrines in this region where pilgrims honor Blessed Kateri are the National Shrine of the North American Martyrs at Auriesville, her birthplace and site of a Kateri Center; the National Shrine of Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha west of Fonda, site of her baptism; and the Kateri Center at Kahnawake, the place of her first Communion and her death.

"It was something to walk around the ground and ponder the violence that occurred there," Father Connor recalled. "She chose a different way of life for herself."

To him, Kateri means "there is something greater than violence."

Kateri was born in the decade just after Mohawks killed Jesuit Father Isaac Jogues at Auriesville and seven other Jesuit priests and lay missionaries between 1642 and 1649. The eight served the missions of Canada, then called New France.

Cause proceeds carefully

Auriesville draws 50,000 visitors every May-October season. Five years ago, Father John J. Paret, SJ, became director of the Auriesville shrine — and also vice postulator in the United States for Kateri's cause.

Father Paret, who taught at McQuaid from 1954 to 1960, lamented that although many miracles have been attributed to Kateri, it has been difficult to get physicians to verify an inexplicable cure. The best hope, he said, is the case of a Georgia boy whose eye was injured when another boy threw a screwdriver at him. After the accident, a priest and two women in North Carolina prayed to Kateri over the boy, who proclaimed after Mass that he could see again.

However, Father Paret acknowledged frustration over obtaining an account from the doctor, who once had called the healing a miracle.

"That's the kind of thing that has been going on," he said.

"It certainly would be good if a lay person and an Indian would be canonized," he said. "The church has unwittingly given the impression canonization is for priests and religious."

Also, he said, most saints are male, while most church-goers are not.

"I think it would be great to canonize another woman," he said.

Although Kateri's course toward canonization apparently slowed after her beatification in 1980, Father Jacques Bruyère, SJ, her vice postulator in Canada, remains optimistic.

"The pope would have canonized her a long time ago, but I think he wants her to be a model to modern youth," he said, predicting that Kateri will be canonized for the third millennium of Christianity.

Father Bruyère plans to spend her U.S. feast day, July 14, at the Auriesville shrine, noting that Canadians and Europeans observe April 17 as her feast day.

Progress in Kateri's cause, he said, would help rekindle Native American Catholics' interest in the church amid some nations' drive to return to their Native American traditions.

"If she were canonized, it would help them come back," he said.

Efforts to keep Native American Catholics in the church are centered at the Tekakwitha Conference National Center, in Great Falls, Mont., which, according to Preston, has grown from a few hundred to several thousand Native Americans representing more than 100 tribes, or nations.

Noting that Native American communities are extremely fragile and often volatile, Preston speculated about what he sees as a "critical new chapter in the history of Indian-Catholic relations."

"Will the final act of the canonization of Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha represent a turning point for Native Americans?" he asked in a recent unpublished article. "How far is the church willing to become involved as an advocate for Indian causes? Will it fight on their behalf in the face of ongoing battles against racism, alcoholism, and stolen Indian land? What shape will Native Catholicism take in the post-Vatican II era?"

Noting two North American Native Americans are now bishops and that others have become deacons and priests, he said, "This kind of empowerment is essential if Catholicism is to survive among Native American peoples."

Preston ranks the possibility of Kateri's canonization as "very high, in the sense it is ripe, ready to be completed. Kateri was made blessed with a reputation for sanctity. That's why they are reluctant to make the second stage without a miracle, because it could be criticized."

"I think he (Pope John Paul II) would like to canonize her, but he needs that miracle," Preston said. It must be instantaneous and irreversible, he said, occurring through prayer to Kateri alone rather than to a panoply of saints.

"We have to be patient and pray and hope such a miracle will soon take place," said Father Peter Gumpel, first assistant to the postulator for Kateri's cause at the Vatican. In a telephone interview from Rome, Father Gumpel added that her three postulators are doing everything they can to foster a scientific demonstration of a miracle through Kateri's intercession.

But as the saying goes, God makes saints — the church simply identifies them.

"In the eyes of the people, she is a saint," said Alice Marion, the daughter of a Mohawk and secretary at the Canadian Kateri shrine in Kahnawake, Quebec. "She was a person very close to God. She prayed a lot and sacrificed a lot."

"People have gotten to know her through word of mouth," Marion added. "So many prayers are granted, she is known more and more. Who doesn't need help in this world?"